

The Importance of Being Earnest

A Trivial Comedy for Serious People

Oscar Wilde

Victorian Age

- ▶ England at its climax of power.
- ▶ Flourishing of the English aristocracy, but a huge wealth disparity between the very rich and the very poor.
- ▶ Victorians interested in order and manners.
- ▶ Life would be improved if it became more refined, more rationally organized, better policed, and therefore safer.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

- ▶ **Oscar Wilde** (1854-1900) created his final and most lasting play – in every respect, a masterpiece of modern comedy with “The Importance of Being Earnest” (1895).
- ▶ Wilde is largely remembered for his flamboyant lifestyle and outrageous behaviour.
- ▶ Educated at the University of Oxford, he wrote poetry, studied the classics and adopted a philosophy of "arts for art's sake". It wasn't uncommon to see him strolling through Picadilly Circus in London, outfitted with a velvet coat, knee breeches, and shoulder-length hair, carrying a lily.

Comedy of Manners

- ▶ A "comedy of manners" is defined as: *A comedy concerned with the social actions and behavior of members of a highly sophisticated, upper-class so*
- ▶ Oscar Wilde chose to satirize the life of the English aristocracy.
- ▶ Characters are typical Victorian snobs, arrogant, overly proper, formal and concerned with money
- ▶ Double meaning behind the word *earnest*, as a male name and as an adjective for seriousness.
- ▶ Earnestness as a key ideal in Victorian culture. *The Importance* lightly shows the limitations and unhappiness produced by the way of life.

Overview

- ▶ Protagonist · John Worthing, known as “Ernest” in town and as “Jack” in the country
- ▶ Major conflict · Jack faces obstacles to his marriage with Gwendolen. Lady Bracknell (Gwendolen’s Mother) objects to what Jack’s family background. Gwendolen is obsessed with the name “Ernest,” since she does not know Jack’s real name.
- ▶ Rising action · Algernon (Jack’s friend in town) discovers that Jack is leading a double life and that he has a pretty young ward named Cecily. Identifying himself as “Ernest,” Algernon visits Jack’s house in the country and falls in love with Cecily.
- ▶ Climax · Gwendolen and Cecily discover that both Jack and Algernon are not really named “Ernest.”
- ▶ Falling action · Miss Prism revealed to be the governess who mistakenly abandoned Jack as a baby and Jack is Algernon’s elder brother, and is in actual fact named Earnest

The Contrast

▶ Country

▶ Jack

▶ (Bunbury)

▶ Cecily

▶ Miss Prism

City

(Ernest)

Algernon

Gwendolen

Lady Bracknell

Plot

- ▶ Jack proposes to Gwendolen. She accepts, because she can only love someone whose name is Ernest
- ▶ Lady Bracknell asks Jack about his house, his habits, his parents
- ▶ Mr Thomas Cardew found Jack in a handbag in the cloakroom at Victoria Station
- ▶ Algernon (Ernest) arrives at Jack's house
- ▶ Jack announces that his brother has died
- ▶ Surprised by the presence of Algernon, tells him to go away
- ▶ Goes to Dr Chasuble to be christened with the name of Ernest

Plot

- ▶ Algernon-Ernest proposes to Cecily who says:“We have been engaged for three months”.I always wanted to marry someone whose name is Ernest”
- ▶ Gwendolen meets Cecily,become friends
- ▶ They discover they are both engaged to Ernest Worthing
- ▶ They quarrel.They quarrel with the two men

Plot

- ▶ The men try to make peace with the two young women
- ▶ They announce they are going to be rechristened that afternoon
- ▶ Mrs. Bracknell forbids marriage between Jack and Gwendolen
- ▶ Asks about Cecily and gives consent to marriage with Algernon (she is rich!)
- ▶ Jack forbids the marriage
- ▶ Miss Prism was the governess at the house of Lady Bracknell's sister
- ▶ She lost the baby: Jack

Plot

- ▶ Jack is Algernon's elder brother
- ▶ His real name is---Ernest

Themes

- ▶ **Victorian Social issues**
- ▶ The theme of marriage runs throughout the play right from the opening dialogue between Algernon and his butler, Lane.

Themes

- ▶ The play is actually an ongoing debate about the nature of marriage and whether it is “pleasant or unpleasant.” Algernon is cynical about marriage until he meets and falls in love with Cecily.
- ▶ Jack, by contrast, is true romantic. At the end of the play, Jack apologizes to Gwendolen when he realizes he had been telling the truth all his life. She forgives him, on the grounds that she thinks he's sure to change, which suggests Gwendolen's own rather cynical view of the nature of men and marriage.

Themes

- ▶ **The Constraints of Morality**
- ▶ Morality and the constraints it imposes on society is a favorite topic of conversation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.
- ▶ Algernon thinks the servant class has a responsibility to set a moral standard for the upper classes.
- ▶ Jack thinks reading a private cigarette case is “ungentlemanly.” “More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read,”
- ▶ Makes fun of the whole Victorian idea of morality as a rigid body of rules about what people should and shouldn't do.

Themes

▶ **Hypocrisy vs. Inventiveness**

- ▶ Jack fabricates his brother Ernest's death, he imposes that fantasy on his loved ones. He rounds out the deception with costumes and props, and he does his best to convince the family he's in mourning.
- ▶ Algernon and Cecily make up elaborate stories that don't really assault the truth in any serious way or try to alter anyone else's perception of reality. In a sense, Algernon and Cecily are characters after Wilde's own heart, since in a way they invent life for themselves as though life is a work of art.

Themes

- ▶ **The Importance of Not Being “Ernest”**
- ▶ Earnestness can take many forms, including boringness, solemnity, pomposity, complacency, smugness, self-righteousness, and sense of duty, all of which Wilde saw as hallmarks of the Victorian character. When characters in the play use the word *serious*, they tend to mean “trivial,” and vice versa.
- ▶ For Wilde, the word *earnest* comprised two different but related ideas: the notion of false truth and the notion of false morality, or moralism.

Motif

▶ Puns

- ▶ The earnest/Ernest joke strikes at the very heart of Victorian notions of respectability and duty. Gwendolen wants to marry a man called Ernest, and she doesn't care whether the man actually possesses the qualities that comprise earnestness. In embodying a man who is initially neither “earnest” nor “Ernest,” and who, through forces beyond his control, subsequently *becomes* both “earnest” and “Ernest,” Jack is a walking, breathing paradox and a complex symbol of Victorian hypocrisy.

Pun

- ▶ In Act III, when Lady Bracknell quips that until recently she had no idea there were any persons “whose origin was a Terminus,” she too is making an extremely complicated pun. The joke is that a railway station is as far back as Jack can trace his identity and therefore a railway station actually is his “origin,” hence the pun.

Motif

▶ **Inversion**

- ▶ The play contains inversions of thought, situation, and character, as well as inversions of common notions of morality or philosophical thought.
- ▶ When Algernon remarks, “Divorces are made in Heaven,” he inverts the cliché about marriages being “made in heaven.”
- ▶ When Jack calls it “a terrible thing” for a man to discover that he's been telling the truth all his life, he inverts conventional morality.
- ▶ Most of the women in the play represent an inversion of accepted Victorian practices with regard to gender roles
- ▶ Gwendolen and Cecily take charge of their own romantic lives, while the men stand by watching in a relatively passive role.
- ▶ Wilde represents Miss Prism in the image of the “fallen woman” of melodrama.

Motif

▶ The Dandy

- ▶ Wilde contributed the figure of the dandy, a character who gave the form a moral texture it had never before possessed.
- ▶ Dandy is a witty, overdressed, self-styled philosopher who speaks in epigrams and paradoxes and ridicules the cant and hypocrisy of society's moral arbiters. To a very large extent, this figure was a self-portrait, a stand-in for Wilde himself.
- ▶ The dandy pretends to be all about surface, which makes him seem trivial, shallow, and ineffectual. Lord Darlington and Lord Goring (in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*) both present themselves this way. In fact, the dandy in both plays turns out to be something very close to the real hero. He proves to be deeply moral and essential to the happy resolution of the plot.

Dandy

- ▶ In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon has many characteristics of the dandy, but he remains morally neutral throughout the play.
- ▶ Gwendolen and Lady Bracknell are being dandiacal when they assert the importance of surfaces, style, or “profile,” and even Jack echoes the philosophy of the dandy when he comes onstage asserting that “pleasure” is the only thing that should “bring one anywhere.”
- ▶ Cecily, with her impatience with self-improvement and conventional morality and her curiosity about “wickedness,” is arguably the character who, after Algernon, most closely resembles the dandy. Her dandiacal qualities make her a perfect match for him.

Symbols

▶ **The Double Life**

- ▶ The double life is the central metaphor in the play, epitomized in the notion of “Bunbury” or “Bunburying.” As defined by Algernon, Bunburying is the practice of creating an elaborate deception that allows one to misbehave while seeming to uphold the very highest standards of duty and responsibility.
- ▶ Jack's imaginary, wayward brother Ernest is a device not only for escaping social and moral obligations but also one that allows Jack to appear far more moral and responsible than he actually is.
- ▶ Jack not only pretends to be something he is not, that is, completely virtuous, but also routinely pretends to be someone he is not, which is very different.

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Symbols

▶ **Food**

- ▶ Food and scenes of eating appear frequently and they are almost always sources of conflict.
- ▶ Act I contains the extended cucumber sandwich joke, in which Algernon, without realizing it, steadily devours all the sandwiches.
- ▶ In Act II, the climax comes when Gwendolen tells Cecily, who has just offered her sugar and cake, that sugar is “not fashionable any more” and “Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays.” Cecily responds by filling Gwendolen's tea with sugar and her plate with cake.
- ▶ Food and gluttony suggest and substitute for other appetites and indulgences